

London Gypsy and Traveller Forum Minutes

8th September 2020

Zoom Meeting

Attending: Geraldine Lindsay – LGT; Ilinca Diaconescu – LGT; Lauren Tapp – LGT; Liza Dodds – LGT; Philomena Maughan – Camden; Eileen Maughan – Haringey; Laura O'Donnell – Southwark; Debbie Weeks Bernard – Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement; Tom Copley – Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development; Sue Mutter – ACERT; Deirdre McGrath – GLA; Chelsea McDonagh – Southwark/Traveller Movement; Mihai Bica – Roma Support Group; Karen Maguire – Enfield Council; Brenda Downes – Lewisham Irish Centre; Patricia Stapleton – Traveller Movement; Nathalie Gordon – GLA; Tom Gill – GLA; Bob Fletcher – Milton Keynes council; Bella Kosmala – GLA; Mena Mongan – Hackney/LGT.

Chair: Ilinca Diaconescu

- 1. Welcome and introductions**
- 2. Feedback and observations from GRT Community about their experience of COVID-19**

A number of community members, GRT organisations and other stakeholders supporting the community spoke of the way COVID-19 has exacerbated the already severe inequalities in health, housing and inclusion experienced by GRT communities in London.

- There have been many challenges facing the Roma community during this time, including a lack of accessible communications from the government. Many people who work in factories were being asked to come in to work more than before the pandemic despite the risk which led to a higher number of people from the community becoming infected with the virus. The impact on employment was particularly stark as many members of the community were unable to access self-employed income support or were facing difficulties accessing Universal Credit. This also was an issue in accessing foodbanks and other services. There was also a big issue with digital exclusion with only 20% of families who contacted the Roma Support Group having IT equipment which is necessary for online classes, accessing information or filling in online support forms. In addition, there has been a great deal of confusion and difficulty for community members regarding Brexit and their settlement status. There is a great deal of distrust in the Government regarding the virus, treatment and potential vaccines.
- There have been huge problems with repairs in Council owned accommodation and Traveller sites during the crisis with community members having to just live with the issues. In addition, there has been a major impact on education due to the closing of schools and the lack of digital skills and equipment. There has also been a rise in domestic violence.
- Enfield Council have implemented a negotiated stopping approach to unauthorised encampments. The Council have made an effort to increase testing for COVID-19 and TB on camps and sites as well as providing more support services and outreach. They have recently conducted a Traveller Housing Needs Assessment for the first time in many years and have evaluated that 21 more pitches are needed and considering a transit site too. They also were aware of an increase in domestic violence and did a number of urgent referrals over this period. Also recognised that there has been a very clear prioritization and resource allocation for homeless people during this period but the GRT community has not been treated similarly despite vulnerability and need.

- In Haringey the prioritisation of homeless people, while being necessary and understandable, was at the expense of the Traveller community. In Haringey, a new site has been planned for a long time but this piece of land has now been given over to temporary housing for homeless people without transparency of how this decision was made and without a clear alternative plan for meeting the accommodation needs of the Traveller Community.
- Digital exclusion has made service and support provision challenging particularly when it comes to health matters.
- Currently the data which is being collected on the effects of COVID-19 does not identify how and if GRT communities are being affected at higher rates.
- There has been a massive impact on education due to digital exclusion and lack of ring fenced resourcing for GRT children and young people. There are many issues with repairs and housing inequalities too.

3. Presentations from Deputy Mayors Debbie Weekes-Bernard and Tom Copley

Debbie Weekes-Bernard - The GLA is determined to 'build back better' from COVID-19 with the understanding that there were severe inequalities for many communities before the crisis. There will be a focus on 8 key areas or missions to try to repair these issues. This has been determined through extensive engagement and dialogue with disproportionately affected communities.

- '15 minute city' – accessing what we need locally, including building back highstreets, resources.
- Digital access for all – particularly pertinent for GRT communities, all Londoners should have wifi, equipment and digital skills.
- Good work for all – employment needs to work for people, livelihoods need to be invested in in terms of pay and conditions.
- Green new deal – improving environmentally friendly and sustainable economies.
- Strong civil society – improving resources and support for the third sector to work with communities
- A new deal for young people – lockdown has really impaired young people's educational achievement and access this needs to be invested within
- Robust safety net – recognizing financial insecurity and poverty is on the rise, we need to improve financial safety nets at the local level.
- Health and wellbeing – access to healthy food and improving mental health.

Tom Copley reaffirmed the Mayor's approach to recovery – making sure that we recognize that these housing and health inequalities existed long before the crisis and have just been made worse through this. The Mayor will be supporting a number of GRT organisations working in London in their legal action to challenge the national definition of Traveller and reaffirmed his commitment to the London Plan's wider definition. There is funding available from the GLA for refurbishment and creation of new sites. He noted that they had funded a study on negotiated stopping from De Montford University. The Mayor's office has responded to the inquiry on unauthorized encampments and made clear they do not support proposals to criminalise trespass by the Home Office.

4. Discussion

- Discussions focused on how to implement high level vision and values in practice. Local Boroughs not treating GRT communities well and are actively discriminatory. How can the GLA support accountability for these councils?
- Local response needed but there is limited power by GLA to enforce action of local Councils. GLA is encouraging councils to apply for funding for sites. Another approach is using local and London plans to strategically influence Council's priorities.
- Need to implement and fund more community development work to ensure that power is put in the hand of communities to pressure government and local authorities to prioritise their issues.
- Funding to support GRT communities through Covid- there has been no specific funding stream for local authorities; the London Community Response Fund was open to community organisations to apply
- Massive digital exclusion means that engagement needs to be done differently for GRT communities.